Reflections on a Cartography of the Non-Visible. Urban Experience and the Internet

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In the first part I will investigate the intertwining of modern, conflict-ridden urban experience with the non-visible, defined here as both motor and effect of urbanity. In the second part, diverse "illumination techniques" will be discussed in a historical perspective. In the third and major part, the Internet will then be analysed as such a technique of visibility, together with city representations on the Web as a media performance of the urban and its conflict management.

This text tries to trace the present urban experience and the conflicts it copes with in relation to the medium of the Internet in two ways. First, urban experience will be discussed as a confrontation with the non-visible, the invisible. Then urban experience and its conflict management will be sketched as a—possible—performance of a media urbanity of the Web.

I

The city represents the central settlement point for all driving forces of modernity. *Invisibility* is one of its essential properties, it is at once motor and result of urban development. I will briefly sketch a few invisibilities: The influx of ever more people into towns leads to concentrations of urban building, to proliferation at the peripheries, but also to the founding of new—so-called—industrial towns. Planned and shaped from other social viewpoints, their large proportions are not comprehensible for the individual. One neither knows nor

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travels in other more distant parts of a town; one has merely a vague inkling of their size and density, much remains unknown, unfamiliar. This experience is one of constructed invisibility.

"The inclusion form of the modern also brings out a specific form of invisibility which is expressed in the structural alienation of town-dwellers from each other," Armin Nassehi (2002: 228) writes, thereby formulating a basic ambivalence of modernity. In the creation of large spaces—represented by railway stations, shopping streets and malls, stadiums, and parks, which imply a coexistence side-by-side of completely different people—no scenarios of togetherness, participation, or coincidence are considered during the planning process. This social invisibility is the cause of endless tensions, anxieties, and phobias, and is revealed in the socio-architectural extremes of gated communities on the one hand and slums on the other.

Cities endow capital with a face. The abstractness and lack of quality of money, of the universal equivalent, is brought to an unusual sensuality in the exhibited surplus of the trading centres, in the extravagance of the shops and malls. But the staging of goods is at the same time evidence of powers that remain incomprehensible for the individual. Behind the illusion of merchandise ticks the invisible regulation mechanism of accumulation, the capital markets.

As the last invisiblity I would cite that of the political powers and their institutions, that of the administration apparatus, which, following the foundation of nation-states, cultivate their ugly displays of Moloch-like bureaucracies. Life is administered by invisible forces.

Together with the non-visible, something else features large in modern urban life—the secretive. Georg Simmel points out that the "secret – the concealment of realities by positive or negative means – […] is one of the greatest mental achievements of humanity. […] The secret offers so to speak the possibility of a second world beside the manifest one, and the one is influenced by the other in the strongest fashion" (Simmel 1906).

At the start of modern urban development, Leibniz draws on the concept of the city to relate his philosophical system's qualities to an experience of the real world. In his "Monadology" the city acts as a metaphor for the existence of different and manifold universes.

The same town looked at from different angles appears completely different, and is, as it were, multiplied *perspectively*. In the same way, it emerges that, because of the infinite number of simple substances, there seem to be as many different universes as there are substances. However, these are only different perspectives on a single universe, according to the different *points of view* of each monad. (Leibniz 1999)

The scheme of urban experience is possibly most clearly depicted in the "cubistic town." Its rendering, like Robert Delaunay's "Simultaneous Window on the Town" (1912), rejoices in the dissolution of the directed gaze, of the

promise of survey and order; it is a direct illustration of the constitutive modern experience of withdrawal of orientation in living space, of forsaking tradition, of the entry of contingency into the world's inner space. The picture celebrates complexity and lack of clarity, affirms the removal of limits and destabilisation.

The multiplicity of a city's perspectives, that is, the awareness of its own "secretive" life, makes it impossible for the individual inhabitant to see the city as a whole. Many parts of it—whether in fact town-parts or rather urban processes and differentiations—necessarily remain invisible to the individual gaze. The urban product is *per se* set in a dialectic of visibility and invisibility. To summarise: the city also spans all that cannot be seen; better: that cannot be experienced. Invisibility means inability of experience, means ignorance as an epistemic fracture.

II

In order to counteract this, the early modern age already programmed numerous techniques of visualisation, of rendering visible, and also of rationalising. They were intended to at least help to simulate—or to substitute for by means of sign systems—a view of the whole. However, this development is always one between enlightenment and hegemony. In answering the question "By what results can the truth of enlightenment be recognised?" Martin Christoph Wieland replied:

when it becomes altogether brighter; when the number of people thinking, inquiring and searching for light in general […] becomes larger and larger, and the mass of prejudices and illusory concepts visibly smaller and smaller; when, unnoticed, the shame of ignorance and irrationality, the longing for useful knowledge and particularly respect in the face of human nature and its rights grows in all classes (Wieland 1996: 81).

This leads us to illumination techniques, which, and this is essential for me, are always techniques of space as well. They evoke a redefinition of urban space, expand, and indeed establish its specific use. To begin with, the first town maps are worth mentioning, for instance the "New Plan of Rome" of 1748 by Giambattista Nolli, the first modernist among town planners. Compared to city views in earlier maps (for example, Michel Turgot's Paris map of 1734), Nolli created desensualized, objectivised overviews. His map shows the town as an abstract ground plan for the planner's eye. The plan divides space into a texture by dichotomy, into a mass of places for living and working defined by similarity and repetition, which he depicts in *black*, and into a certain quantity of objects, monuments, and traffic routes, which accommodate all forms of public in exterior and interior space; these he depicts in

white. These actually appear empty and unmarked; one could also say they are "invisible." On the one hand, Nolli's plan is a first attempt at introducing visibility by means of a rational order, allowing the inhabitant to find orientation and an overview. On the other hand, the cartographic description of public space as indeterminate is an uncertainty relation, an organism of unknown variables. The public nature of the street is charted here as a space for moving and conveying, which brings about for the user contact with an unpredictable number of what are for him surprising, unknown and foreign elements engaged in constant change (cf. Ries 2002).

Peter Eisenman's study of an "Architecture of Absence" also revealed elements of an "Architecture of Invisibility." As in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's "Plan of the Campo Marzio" of 1748:

Piranesi uses the Rome that was extant in the 18th century as a starting point, but it possesses no original value; it is merely a being in the present. From this existential moment of being, he takes buildings that existed in the 1st and 2nd centuries, in Imperial Rome, and places them in the same framework of time and space as the 18th century. Next, Piranesi moves monuments of the 1st century from their actual location to other locations, as if these were their actual sites in the 18th century. Piranesi also proposes buildings that never existed. They seem at first glance to be memoires of buildings that could have existed because they look like buildings until one examines them for their function. […] the ground becomes an interstitial trace between objects, traces that exist in both time and space. […] it is a multiple palimpsest, a series of overlays that mix fact with fiction. (Eisenman 2004: 84-85)

Eisenman redefines the map as a "diagram," which comes into operation as a "template of possibilities" against a "metaphysics of presence."

Not only the city plans are of interest; the empirical, statistical procedures introduced by the administrations, the tables, lists, and diagrams (the birth and death statistics, the map of the metro, the telephone directory etc.) also create regulation systems. Maps, lists, and diagrams do not make a town easier to experience, but by *showing* some of its measurable and decipherable characteristics they can offer the inhabitant at least a partial orientation by means of these visualisations.

It is *analytical images and data*, *functional images* that help to make the "the city's space system" accessible, that attempt to convert the invisible into legible, visible values.

I will not look into all the other countless illuminating techniques that make the city brighter, more readily available, and meaningful, for example electrification, the visual guidance systems that run through towns, or video surveillance. Rather, I concentrate on the "absolute" image of the city as offered by the Internet today. Websites are functional images that are capable of more than of just providing data. As media performance, they help to redefine urbanity and offer completely new models of complexity of experience, while simultaneously enhancing the status of social space.

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III

Nowadays everything social is represented on the Internet, or potentially available there as the medium's artefact. In this respect the Internet is a universal medium permitting the reverse argumentation: The Web embodies the totality of everything social, it is the "pure social."

The same applies to cities: Today each and every one of them is functionally duplicated in manifold ways. It is, however, important that instead of merely doubling reality, new spaces of perception and action are created. Only the Internet—as a participatory medium aiming at a rich diversity—is capable of comprehensively exhibiting the different urban systemic spaces and of influencing them. In a common argumentation of sociology, the category of projection is used to extract correlations or derivations, as in the following thesis: "Residential segregation is the projection of social inequality into (urban) space" (Häußermann/Siebel 2002: 33). It could also be said: *Segregation is the representation of inequality in space*.

This way of thinking presupposes that space itself is inactive and "enduring" something. The same happens in argumentations within media theory that reduce media to simple representations of society. When applied to the Internet, the conclusion could then read: social inequality is projected into the Internet and likewise shapes segregation there: Migrants have their own little sites which stand in the shade of the mighty, official sites. So is the Internet just a static mirror image of society or the urban? I would suggest four counterarguments to that.

Universal medium: in its capacity for displaying the social and making it visible world-wide, the Internet is a universal medium. Based on its universal availability and on its omni-perspective and dialogic constitution, the Web embodies the pure social. The Web is always larger than its individual usage.

Space differentiation: Internet practice aims at a variety of space, at space differentiation—but without hierarchies, without ownership structures or inequalities. It fosters a media juxtaposition, a coexistence of individual, communal, institutional, and capital interests that facilitate other, and considerably more, things than any factual coexistence in the "real" town or "real" world does.

Process differentiation within space differentiation: the Internet offers the most diverse programmes of exchange, communication, coincidence: from correspondence by forms to P2P, from mailing lists and chat rooms to Web logs. This interaction differentiation advances specialisation and individualisation to an extent no other medium previously did.

Contingency: on account of its link structure, that is, its hypertext logic, the Internet is in a position to deliver the unwanted, the unpredictable, the new to

its user. It introduces him to the understanding that, as Luhmann noted, "everything can also be different."

With this argumentation the Web establishes its own space, a socio-media space that is part of *the geoaesthetics of the media*. The geoaesthetics of the Internet relates to the audio-visual construction and communicative linking of social spaces, their perception, and dealing with them. Every city representation is the expression of such geoaesthetics of the Web. Like no other medium, the Internet potentiates *a media performance of the urban*. I will focus on the official city representations on the Web. It is necessary to distinguish between three characteristics of the Web.

City representations on the Internet are *self-presentations* in the sense of a demonstration of *administrative complexity* on the one hand and of *function differentiations of the urban* on the other. The entire administration of town institutions is made visible. At the same time, societal forces, which help constitute towns, are displayed: the economy, together with work and the labour market, the culture and the spectacle, the history of the town with its housing, living, and progressing.

In parallel to these representation scenarios, individual *action potentials* are offered for navigation within the complexity and the differentiation. First, *orientation* is promised: What are the overall possibilities and institutions, what services are at one's disposal? Second, *knowledge* is provided: What do the individual sections provide, what contents do they offer? And third, *operating guidelines* are offered: How must I organise myself, how must I behave in order to achieve this or that?

These three action potentials mainly concern contact with administrations or public services, but also those areas dealing with troubles and problems, such as emergency services, self-help groups, certain associations. Navigation, however, also needs a search function connecting to a database whose keywords can be called up by a "search" or "research" function. These databases quickly reveal whether the sites do in fact cover the full extent of the urban, civil landscape and also include fields of conflict, or whether the political interest merely consists in vain self-representation. Consequently, this function brings about a change of direction: not what one does not know is searched for, but rather what the database does not know, or does not want to know, is scrutinised.

Apart from these Web offerings, another quite different innovative function comes into play: that of a new public space. For the first time in the history of mass media, the Internet comes forward as a media system that turns all receivers into producers and transmitters, and its participative dimension inaugurates a "media world public," developing completely independent, sovereign structures of interchange and communication. This concerns the messaging boards, the mailing lists, the chat forums, the websites built up by in-

dividuals, groups, communities, the content management systems, the Web logs, the P2P systems. These "coincidence techniques" turn the netizens into an audience, a media public whose sovereignty affirms the Web as a democratic institution.

Official city pages are thus intended to offer discursive interfaces for political communication, but also to grant visual access to all those pages that reflect town life and urban conflicts on the part of civil actors. It is astonishing to observe that official city sites almost entirely reject this participative dimension of the Web—they represent and give directions, but are not prepared to enter into a discursive, public debate on the multiplicity of urban conflicts with individual citizens, associations, or initiative groups. Apart from providing necessary resources, politicians and officials need to prepare for an active communication with citizens—and not just to summon them to the ballot box. The urban landscape of conflict is in need of just these media interfaces in order to counteract the one-sided power gradient—in the sense of a genuine participatory democracy (Claus Leggewie).

But is there not an error here in my own observation and expectation? Why should the town of Darmstadt's administrative website want more than to keep with its designated definition of just being administrative? On the other hand: Is this not a somewhat abbreviated concept of politics? The Web is per se a decentrally configured structure, and so there will always be various manifestations, options of visibility, alternatives to the "official clearing," which in fact also leaves much in the dark, or proceeds to place it there. Many conflicts do not take place on the local level alone, or cannot be represented there; rather, they expand out into many regions and towns, and, above all, they hardly are of local origins. Problems like migration, segregation, unemployment, poverty, and gender inequality are global issues and concerns. The Internet is at its most impressive when interconnecting translocally.

IV

For it is the decisive nature of the metropolis that its inner life overflows by waves into a far-flung national or international area. […] The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is this functional extension beyond its physical boundaries. And this efficacy reacts in turn and gives weight, importance, and responsibility to metropolitan life. Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather [it] is the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially. In the same way, a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines. (Simmel 1950)

When Simmel wrote this, the city represented the only "expert system" for the non-visible, the complex, the differentiating out of systems. Today things are different. The "web of the webs" is no town. Yet it has become an expert sys-

tem for the non-visible. The "inner life" of the Internet consists of all the computers connected worldwide, of all the sites on all the computers worldwide. That is, the Web possibly epitomises the formula of "world inner space," as reported by Hardt/Negri's political philosophy, or by Peter Sloterdijk's historical anthropology. To rethink the whole world as an inner space, as an interior which we can never look at from the outside, but in which we should freely roam. By means of the Internet, for example. Its "functional extension" results from the possibility for a connected individual to perceive all other connected individuals or institutions or power centres, and perhaps to communicate with them. The Internet does not function like geographical space with a Here and There, but rather like a purely relational space where there is exclusively a Here and Now. For the data stream every individual interface is at every moment the centre of the world. Yet every Internet site can indeed be measured by the "sum of effects emanating from [it] temporally and spatially." A site like *blogsbyiranians.com* thus obtains its legitimacy from its urban quality of reaching as many people in the world's inner space as is possible—not only in Iran, but also world-wide. Being part of the Web means being part of an urbanity, understood as a life form.

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